THEREFORE
I Corinthians 15:51-16:1
November 5, 1978

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It is always difficult to assess the long-range significance of a phenomenon as it is happening. But I am convinced that historians one day will shake their heads in wonder about the fact that a generation of young people who for a decade or so shook an entire society to its roots by marching, demonstrating, streaking, singing the music of revolution and congregating all over the country challenging everything the middle class held dear - that generation faded as quickly as it emerged and gave way to another generation that found, of all things, religion.

The telephone calls began about five years ago. Every minister I know has received them and agonized over them. The pattern is uncanny because of its similarity. The call is precipitated by the fact that a young man or woman has just announced to his parents that he has seen the light and has joined a religious sect, the Moonies for instance, Harc Krishna, The Church of Scientology, or a radically evangelical Christian group. The young person was brought up in the church, the story goes; baptized in a mainline Protestant congregation, attended Sunday School fairly regularly as a child, joined the church at adolescence in a Confirmation Class, and then began to lose interest. The Youth activities of the church were the first to go, then Sunday School, finally worship. No one was alarmed: it is, after all, the accepted and now typical way middle class families deal with institutional religion. By the time the young person went off to college, Christianity simply had nothing whatever to do with the rest of his or her life. Armed with an adolescent theology, a collection of obscure Bible stories from the fifth grade, and a worship experience which included a grant total of ten hours in the past three years, the young person walked straight into the buzz saw of articulate, reasoned, academic atheism and the battle was over before the fifst shot was fired. And then, out of the blue, this: this unlikely, frightening phenomenon of that middle class young person, suddenly shaving his head and wearing a saffron robe; or moving into the Moonie commune and selling flowers at the airport; or standing on the street corner handing out tracts that ask, "Are you certain where you will spend eternity?"

"Why, Reverend? What happened? What did we do wrong?" There is a lot of anguish and guilt and real poignancy in the phone calls, and as a parent I am anything but judgmental. I'm not sure I know what went wrong - although I have some strong hunches.

Robert Bellah, a sociologist at the University of Califonia in Berkeley, and a strong United Church of Christ layman, worked with a survey in the Bay Area to discover why the conservative, evangelical churches were scoring so heavily with middle class college students. The survey revealed that young people turn to those churches for three main reasons: they find in the theology simple answers and a purpose for living: they discover group experiences and an identity different from the rest of society: and, most important of all, these churches demand discipline and sacrifice; there is a high cost to belonging. There are many scholars studying the phenomenal growth of Sun Myong Moon's Unification Church, and the answers are strikingly similar. Commitment must be total: young converts live together, work together for the common good, bind themselves to a puritanical ethic which strictly forbids alcohol, drugs, tobacco and pre-marital sex. There is, apparently, tremendous appeal to a religion that demands much from its adherents.

To pursue our inquiry further we must compare that phenomenon with the traditional institutions of religion in our society; namely, the mainline churches.

There - here - I would submit, Christianity has become an intellectual exercise. Now we must proceed carefully: we are called to love God with heart, soul, body - and mind. The Presbyterian tradition has held out for a reasoned faith and a theology that does not have to run for cover in the halls of the academy. There is no excuse, in our corner of the Kingdom, for intellectual shoddiness. But somewhere along the way of our evolution as a particular religious tradition, we gave birth to the notion that Christianity is, essentially, believing certain ideas to be true: ideas about God and Jesus and humanity. To be a Christian is to know the ideas, to speak the vocabulary, and to believe - in one's mind - that the ideas are true. Now, I would defend that as a portion of what being a Presbyterian is all about. But when it is the totality, the essence of our Gospel, it becomes dry, sterile, detached from most of life which is not intellectual and ultimately rather boring. I'm reading a book by a Scotsman, Ian Pitt-Watson, in which he characterizes most Church of Scotland preaching as "offering painstaking answers to questions that nobody is asking." (The Folly of Preaching, p.52).

Truth, in our church tradition, is something one establishes in the mind. But the Biblical tradition, however, knows better than that. Alan Richardson writes: "According to the Bible our knowledge of God is not like our knowledge of electrone or square roots; we know truth about God only by doing it, not by talking or reasoning about it, just as we know love only by loving. Truth in the Biblical sense is something to be practiced." (In Watson, ibid, p.36).

We may need a theologian to tell us that but I believe young people know it inherently. They are bored, rightly, with "mere theology". Their integrity forces them to conclude that religion that is confined to the intellect; religion that requires nothing but intellectual assent; religion that demands nothing of its adherents is religion that isn't worth much.

With all that by way of introduction, look with me at our text this morning: the fifteenth chapter of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, one of the most beloved and glorious passages of Scripture. Paul is talking about the Resurrection. Theologically, the question is the ultimate question: "What happens when I die?" No one who ever allowed himself a moment of integrity has not asked it. No one who ever loved another person - a child, a man, woman, parent, grandparent or friend has not wondered - "what becomes of it all? Is this intense love for nothing?" No one who ever lost a dear one has not, in the dark night of the valley of the shadow of death, wondered about this - this eternal human question. Is it merely peripheral? As some of the academics suggest, is our concern simply the rusting armour of our own obvious mortality? Is it no more than our insatiable ego crying out - "I can't stand the thought that the world will one day be going on without me"? Is it nothing more than our fantasies and illusions and essential weakness? Was Shakespeare right?

> "Out, out brief candle.
> Life's but a walking shadow:
> A poor player that struts and frets
> His hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."
> (Macbeth, Act V, Scene 3, Line 19).

To be human is to ask the question. And so Paul, with the tight logic of the scholar presents his argument. The Gospel is essentially the good news of a resurrection; and because Jesus Christ overcame death, so shall His people. That

is the promise: it is more than hope: it is now reality. By the time you read to the end of the fifteenth chapter the argument is exhausted and Paul becomes artist, straining for the poetry to express a joy and peace too profound to comprehend. There are no dearer words: "Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye - - for the trumpet will sound!" There are many parts of Handel's Messiah which move me deeply. But none more so than the duet which resolves this passage. The voices are light, playful, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ....."

Therefore, ...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your work is not in vain...Now concerning the contribution for the saints." Without breaking stride, without taking a breath, Paul moves from the loftiest doxology in the music of our faith to the mundane realities of the life of faith and from there to a collection for the poor. From Easter to Stewardship Sunday without missing a beat. From the empty tomb of Jesus Christ to the Every Member Canvass. It's all of a piece: there is no divide: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast."

Christianity is a "therefore" religion. Someone took the time to count and tabulated 1,035 "therefores" in the Bible. It's on every page. Since such and such is true, "therefore", this is how we shall now live.

Religion that is worth anything at all is always "therefore" faith: a synthesis of believing and obeying, of knowing and doing. The agenda for every Christian is to bring together, in the context of everyday life, faith and practice. And it is precisely at this point that the mainline Protestant Church is most vulnerable.

We Presbyterians value freedom. Our tradition was born out of conflict with an ecclesiastical power that presumed to dictate every detail of the individual's life and granted to the clergy an authority which was abused more often than not. Presbyterians dig their heels in whenever they sense the church tying any strings to the grace of God in Jesus Christ which they believe, rightly, is a gift. It's a very healthy skepticism: it has served us well. But it has also become the rationale for throwing out the church window any vestige of religious discipline or religious demand.

William Muehl, a lawyer on the faculty of Yale Divinity School, is a contemporary Christian who commands my attention. Listen to him on the subject: "Most modern Christians have let the relationship between faith and practice become an automatic thing, something to be taken for granted and avoided in polite conversation...By avoiding discussion of the religious implications of our daily behavior, we manage to avoid facing those implications directly. The man who said that he did not know what he believed about a particular subject because he had never heard himself talk about it spoke a more profound truth than he intended." (All the Damned Angels, p.85). Muehl goes on to explain how he handles the ordeal of sharing a plane seat with a man who wants to talk trivialities for five hours. "The surest, quickest way to end such a conversation is to bring up a serious issue and ask my companion about its moral implications. What's wrong about adultery? What's so right about family life and the market economy?...For a few seconds he waits expectantly for the punch line of my little joke. But when he perceives that I am serious and mean to pursue the inquiry, he mutters something appropriate such as, 'well, Jesus' and quickly discovers urgent business in the center spread of Playboy."

At our best, we Christians have known that you cannot separate theology from ethics. At our best we have practiced what we preached and preached what we practiced. In our finest hours we have known, and known clearly, that to believe in Jesus Christ is to pick up some kind of cross and follow Him. In the Roman Colosseum; in Germany in the 30's and 40's; in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama; and today, in Moscow and Peking and Seole and Hanoi: in rare moments of clarity we have known that Jesus Christ calls us to give and love and share and heal - and that His call is a demand without which our faith isn't worth the time of day. In moments of understanding we have known with a terrible clarity that the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us in a direction almost diametrically opposite to the tenor of the culture in which we live.

We do not live under Marxism or fascism, but we do live in a culture that is unapologetically acquisitive. The Westminster Divines may have believed that the chief end of man is to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever", but everyone knows that our chief end is to "buy, own, use, discard and buy some more". The sociologists and psychologists are now understanding that since the Second World War this country has undergone a mammoth and profound change in moral values. Suddenly everyone concluded that he or she deserved a bigger slice of the pie. Suddenly it became the norm simply to take a bigger slice, across the board - from the price of sugar to food stamps, from ITT to the teenage shoplifter. Lotteries and television give-away shows became the eschatological hope for millions of Americans who bought the lie - that there is something for nothing, and to get it is to be saved.

And instead of naming that for what it is,the Church meekly followed suit. Listen to this indictment, written by an American churchman: "We of the liberal Protestant tradition have accommodated ourselves to the cultural climate of the free and easy. We have capitulated to our secular environment...our churches are crowded with honest, genial folk who were swept into membership around the age of twelve because it was the thing all the other children were doing,folks who perhaps never once have been challenged to make an adult commitment of life to Christ, with all its implications." (R. Raines, New Life in the Church, p.23-56).

Discussing the survey I mentioned earlier Robert Bellah suggests that we should learn anew the power and value of a Christian faith that requires much of its adherents; that we should have learned by now that we do no favor by making it easy for ourselves and others to be Christians.

The simple fact is that in human history, only the disciplined have changed things much. Only forty years ago or so Whittaker Chambers stunned the world by revealing the tight discipline and total commitment required in underground communist cell groups - beside which church membership seems child's play.

And a simpler fact is that a religion of power and peace and wholeness and salvation is inevitably a religion for which you will give everything.

This is Stewardship Sunday,and you may have been wondering when he was going to get around to talking about money. I've been talking about it all along. But, in fact, the issue is not just money. This church has a budget which describes the activities and programs which will happen here in 1979. It is possible only insofar as members of this church believe in what we are doing enough to pay for it. That's simple: you didn't have to come to church to hear it.

The real issue is the "therefore" of faith: the wholeness and integrity of your religion. The real issue is the matter of your Christian discipleship, your personal and deep commitment to Jesus Christ. The crux of the matter for you and me is to move from the verbal affirmation we make so easily to lives that reflect the struggle and sacrifice and glory of being disciples of Jesus Christ.

There comes for all of us a moment of truth, when we can no longer escape into the safety of vague theology: a moment when we must see the issue in all its clarity. Our evangelical brothers and sisters structure those decisive moments a little too overtly for our Presbyterian sensitivities. But may I respectfully submit that finally, your faith, your wholeness as a person, your salvation, depends on saying yes to a Lord who asks you to pick up a cross and follow. That is the issue.

Dag Hammarskjold wrote in his diary on Whitsunday, 1961:

> "I don't know who - or what - put the question:
> I don't know when it was put. But at some moment I
> did answer yes to someone - or something - and from that
> hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that,
> therefore, my life, in self surrender, had a goal."
> (Markings, p.205).

Or as St. Paul had it:

> "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable,
> always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that
> in the Lord your labor is not in vain."
>
> Amen.

Father, forgive our timidity, our brittle faith, our lack of courage. Help us to be what we say we are - what we want to be. Give us strength and grace and love to follow Jesus Christ, to welcome the sacrifice and privilege of bearing His cross.

Amen.